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ABSTRACT

Cultural differences are very much a part of international trade and global competition and companies which are currently in, or would like to engage in, international trade must be willing to adapt to foreign cultures with a firm understanding of national and individual environmental factors. Successful intercultural communication includes an awareness of the education, laws, economy, politics, social norms, and language of cultures; and an awareness of world events and an understanding of their significance in the global marketplace are requisites for success in international business ventures. Some of the national characteristics that successful international business communicators need to develop an awareness of are described; they include laws (regulations), politics, religion, and the language used. Other areas discussed that can greatly influence business relations include the following: how time is viewed; encountering different attitudes about food, alcohol, and direct person-to-person contact; and differences in social graces such as handshaking or the use of nonverbal communication (gestures). Finally, the differences found in business correspondence from other countries is examined. Contains 15 references. (GLR)

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INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION: PRESCRIPTION FOR SUCCESS

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Although travel, transportation, and communication technologies have figuratively shrunk the world, profound differences in culture continue to separate the nations of the earth. These culture differences will continue to exist because of peoples' uniquenesses. Culture can mean many things to people. It can defined as the sum total of one's living experiences, the behavioral characteristics typical of a group, or a way of life of a group of people.[1] Dommermouth defines culture as "the configuration of learned behavior and results of behavior whose component elements are shared and transmitted by members of a particular society."[2]

Approximately 6,000 American companies have foreign operations, and more than 20,000 American firms export products or services abroad.[3] Global competition abounds. International trade takes place because of the differences in productive capabilities of various countries. As money, credit, trade, patents, and market information link world enterprises together, people bring their uniquenesses to the forefront--their language and cultures.

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[1]Raymond V. Lesikar, "SPecial Topic: Techniques of International Communication," BASIC BUSINESS COMMUNICATION, 5th ed., Richard D. Irwin, 1991.

[2]William P. Dommermouth, PROMOTION, (Boston: Kent Publishing Company), p. 183, 1984.

[3]Lesikar, p. 546.

Unfortunately, people tend to view the ways of their culture as normal and the ways of other cultures as bad, wrong, peculiar, or such. Executives and employees can no longer ignore the influences of the Far East or Europe, culturally or economically. Ethnocentrism is the specific term for judging other groups or countries by the cultural standards of one's group--resulting in a feeling of superiority.

All people are products of a culture--some are products of more than one culture. What we need to do is to show a deep respect for others--humility. A recent study indicates that many top-level executives have worked abroad, 6.7% CEOs, 18.8% Presidents, and 17.2% Vice Presidents.[4] But then, you do not have to go abroad to find cultural pluralism. Various states in the United States have their own pockets of internationals. More often than not many of them are sitting in our classrooms. When I look at the students in my business communications class, I see numerous cultures--all different, yet important. As the number of people in the United States who use English as a second language increases, it represents an opportunity for concerned individuals to commit themselves to developing effective intercultural communication skills. Probably your business communication classroom might one day look like mine is now. It is quite likely

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[4]Herta A. Murphy and Herbert W. Hildebrandt, "International and Intercultural Communication," EFFECTIVE BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS, 6th ed., McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1991, p. 732.

that many of your prospective business graduates will work abroad.

At California State University, the makeup of the student body is 32.2% Hispanic, 28.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, 27.5% Caucasian, non-Hispanic, 11.4% Black/African-American, not Hispanic, and 0.5% Native American.[5] In one of my Business Communications classes (class size of 25) this past quarter, there were one to two students each from Mexico, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, India, Viet Nam, and Indonesia as well as Hispanics, Canadians, Afro-Americans, and a Native American; in the other class, I had two from China, four from Taiwan, two from Hong Kong, two from Viet Nam, one each from Mexico, Philippines, and Indonesia in addition to Hispanics, Canadians, and Afro-Americans.

It is interesting to note how willing these students are to learn another culture in order to pursue their quest for higher education in the United States. These students not only have to communicate in a social setting and in a business setting but also in an academic setting. Even the meaning of intelligence, the role of the teacher and student, parental expectations of students, the significance of academic failure, evaluation methods, thought patterns, and students' expectations differ from culture to culture.

People tend to feel at tease with familiar or similar environments. But if you were thrust into an unknown culture, how

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[5]Cal State L. A., FACTS, No. 4, January 1991.

would you fare? Well, Murphy and Hildebrandt state that you might go through a number of stages;[6] anticipation--maybe you truly want to learn a different culture; disillusionment--the television is on only at certain hours and the communication is not in English or the food is different; adaptation--you buy a can with a picture of a chicken on the outside only to discover after you get home that it was a can of oil in which to fry the chicken. At this stage, you may laugh at your error, and finally you reach acceptance--you accept the difference and realize that this difference is not a deficiency and easily move between your culture and the host culture.

In learning a culture, one must be willing to adapt to a culture. A firm understanding of national and individual environmental factors is needed. Both the message sender and receiver are affected by external and internal stimuli. Such factors may include your perceptions of the country and the people with whom you may work and/or communicate.

Successful intercultural communication includes an awareness of the education, laws, economy, politics, social norms, and language of cultures. Education is different in all countries; but in the United States, we are dedicated to educating the masses. The United States by far has many managers who have had extensive education, while that is not the case in the Far East. In some

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[6]Murphy and Hildebrandt, p. 738.

countries, people are in not in a position to acquire higher education. However, one needs to look beyond surface conclusions. Students need exposure to domestic and international business issues. With the occurrence of several events abroad recently, global education is paramount for providing an international understanding of business.[7]

The economic world will soon undergo major changes. In 1992, the European Economic Community will eliminate economic barriers among its 12 member countries; and in 1997, China will take over Hong Kong. Challenging opportunities will surface for those who understand foreign markets and are prepared to respond quickly. An awareness of world events and an understanding of their significance in the global marketplace are requisites for success in international business ventures.[8] The business graduate who gets the job today will be one who is prepared to work in any setting with people of any race, religion, or ethnic orgin. The successes of the American students will greatly depend on their ability to transcend their ethnocentricity.[9] Notwithstanding, today's business graduate will likely interact with colleagues,

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[7]Ray D. Bernardi, "Marketing and The 1992 European Common Market," BUSINESS EDUCATION FORUM, Vol. 45, No. 4, p. 31-33, January, 1991.

[8]Patricia A. LaRosa, "A Global Awareness Study of Today's Business Students," BUSINESS EDUCATION FORUM, Vol. 45, No. 3, p. 34-36, December, 1990.

[9]Rosetta R. Reed, "A Taste of International Culture for Business Students," THE BALANCE SHEET, p. 29-31, March/April, 1989.

managers, and executives from many cultures.

American students in general are geographically illiterate, lack knowledge of world affairs, and often lack proficiency in a foreign language. These intercultural inadequacies may be further supported by a belief that the ability to speak a foreign language is not absolutely necessary.[10] In an article by former President Jimmy Carter, he states:

> In the education of our children . . . I would want them to know that they are world citizens. Their lives are inextricably tied to those in other nations. I would want them eager to learn foreign languages or be forced to if necessary.[11]

International literacy requires an awareness of other cultures--their customs, mores, issues, politics, and economics.

AACSB, the accrediting agency for business schools in the United States, has been advocating internationalizing the business school curriculum. "Think global, act local," the watchword of business has spawned curricular reform in collegiate schools of businesses to include an international component, including a knowledge of a foreign culture.[12] "Companies' choices of leaders in the year 2000 will be governed by increasing international competition, globalization of companies, spread of technology,

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[10]Donna H. Redmann and Bobbye J. Davis, "Ideas for Developing International Literacy," BUSINESS EDUCATION FORUM, Vol. 44, No. 3, p. 20-22, December 1989.

[11]Jimmy Carter, "Global Communication: Role of United States' Universities," EDUCOM Review, Vol. 25, No. 4, p. 18-21, Winter, 1990.

[12]Jeremy Main, "B-Schools Get a Global Vision," FORTUNE, p. 78, July 17, 1989.

demographic shifts, and speed of overall change," according to the Wall Street Journal.[13]

Global business has become so pervasive that we no longer pay much attention to the fact that our shoes may come from Spain, our car from Germany, and our television from Japan. "Explosive technology, instant communication, and rapid transportation have fostered this globalization of business."[14]

If you truly and sincerely want to acquire international businews savvy, here are some useful reminders and suggestions:

Culture influences practically everything from abstract managerial concepts to social niceties that lubricate a business transaction. While American managers are action-oriented, open, accountable, and typically focus on short-term goals, Japanese managers try to achieve perfection, focus on long-term benefits, harmony, and consensus.

The study of individualism versus group importance will further enhance students' awareness of cultural differences. In group-oriented cultures such as Asians, the family, group, or organization take precedence over the individual.

Some national characteristics that successful international business communicators need to develop an awareness of include:

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[13]Amanda Bennett, "The Chief Executives in Year 2000 Will Be Experienced Abroad," WALL STREET JOURNAL, February 27, 1989.

[14]Wanda Blockhus, "Research in International Business Education," BUSINESS EDUCATION FORUM, Vol. 44, No. 5, p. 35-38, February, 1990.

Laws (Regulations). In various countries, developed or developing, laws affect business communication and salable products. Restrictions on advertising to children, advertising cigarettes, or showing women unveiled in advertisements, particularly in Iran, is forbidden.

Economics. The economic status of various countries is worth knowing prior to conducting business. Standards of living per capita vary from nation to nation, and prices are often set by cartels (oil) or by governments.

Politics. Concepts of democracy vary in interpretation. Political changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union directly affect future business relations.

Religion. Religious beliefs can affect business communication and influence an entire nation. While similarities can be garnered from Protestant, Catholics, and Jewish faiths which are found abroad, and often in the minority, Hinduism, Moslem, and Buddhism are prevalent in many parts of the world. Such latter religions do have an impact upon business relations and ventures.

Social norms. Just as education, laws, economics, politics, and religion affect a nation, so do its social norms. Genders affect business decisions. In some nations, the male dominates while in others, women are relegated to background positions. The family and how its members relate have a direct bearing on decisions, buying patterns, pooling of resources, etc. All these factors affect behavior and business communication.

Language. Finally, we get to the all important constraint which undergirds all the preceding constraints--that of language. Unless both sender and receiver know a common language, the opportunities for successful communication are significantly limited. English is a world language. This is evident by the following:[15]

1. Over three hundred million people use English as their primary language.
2. Six hundred and fifty million people use English as a second language.
3. English is spoken, written, and broadcast on every continent.
4. English is the official language in twenty-nine countries.
5. About three-fourths of the world's mail is written in English.
6. One half of the world's newspapers are printed in English.
7. English is the language of three-fifths of the world's radio stations.
8. English is the most widely studied language in the countries in which it is not native.

English is also considered the language of international business. Reciprocity is warranted as interpersonal bonds can be forged between you and your host country by your trying to learn

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[15]Vern Terpstra and Kenneth David, THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS, 2nd ed., South-Western Publishing Company, p. 32, 1985.

the language of the host country before arrival. They will forgive your errors in language because they now know you cared enough to try to learn their language or at least some of the key words in order to communicate.

Living within that overall culture is the individual who brings or exhibits his or her own personal habits and lifestyles. All cultures on a more personal level have differences in verbal and nonverbal cues which are expressed through varying concepts of time, individual space, food, dress, etiquette at home and at work, and decision making patterns.

Time is a nonverbal language to Americans. Now, answer the question, "Does time revolve around you?" or "Do you revolve around time?" Time is money to Americans particularly when it concerns conducting business. However, persons in Latin America and the Middle East treat time more casually. In Germany, people are time-precise. Knowing culture differences in time helps you understand why some responses are slow--by your standards.

Concerning space, some cultures operate on closeness in communicating--a breath brushes you in conversation in Saudia Arabia or you are standing so close on a commuter train in Japan or India you cannot fall down. Americans demand space depending upon the situation. Closeness is fine where intimacy is concerned. But Americans have a need for personal space (1-2-1/2 feet, social space (4-7 feet), or public space (12-25 feet). Other cultures feel Americans are cold or aloof because we need our comfort space.

In China, many people share the same office; however, as we move up the corporate ladder, we expect a bigger and more elaborate office. Don't you think you could be just as effective in a little cubbyhole? Perceptions are ingrained in us, and we usually follow tradition or patterns without question.

The preparation of food and its cleanliness will vary once we go to a foreign country. As with most Americans, we "look diligently for a McDonald's in France or a Domino's Pizza or a Kentucky Fried Chicken in Beijing. We must remember that pork is forbidden in middle eastern countries but is part of the Chinese diet and that of many other countries. Beef if hard to find in India; veal is plentiful in Europe, rice is ever present in Hong Kong and China.[16]

Alcohol is forbidden for Buddhists, Moslems and Hindus. A person can land in jail for bringing liquor into such countries. I think the Gulf War stirred the conscience of many since some of the American soldiers wanted alcohol beverages, but they were not permitted to have such out of respect for Saudi Arabia's beliefs and laws. For the first time in recent war history, the Army Forces were conducting training sessions on the cultures of countries in the Middle East, specifically Saudi Arabia, so our soldiers would be fully cognizant of the national and individual environmental factors there. Our bodies and palate must adapt as

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[16]Murphy and Hildebrandt, p. 745.

well. Other issues surfaced regarding the role of American women in Saudi Arabia.

It was interesting to see Mrs. Bush in the Middle East wearing Army fatigues. You need to be aware of acceptable clothing when conducting business in a host country. Business suits for men and women are common in the United States; however, a British businessman may wear a suit and carry an umbrella; an Indian, a Nehru jacket; an Hawaiian, a muumuu, a Polynesian, a Polynesian sarong; a Japanese, a Japanese kimono; or the Mao dark-blue jacket and pants. In some countries, women are convered from head to toe; but with American styles, it is common for business women to wear faddish styles such as the short-skirted suit. You need to dress appropriately in the country in which you are pursuing a business venture and/or be knowledgeable of that country's dress codes.

Social graces (etiquette) differ from country to country as well. Do you shake hands in Germany? Yes. Do you hug in Italy? Yes. Do you bring a gift when visiting homes in Europe or in Japan? Yes. But if you bring flowers, do you choose red roses in Germany? No. White chrysanthemums in France, Belgium, or Japan? No. Should you expect a two-to three-hour lunch in Europe? Yes, but be patient. In Saudi Arabia, age is paramount, so sons defer to their fathers.

In decision making, the Italians, French, and British prefer more leisurely social amenities. But the Germans, Swiss, Dutch, and Scandinavians are quick at getting to the issue--a

characteristic of the Americans. In Japan, decision time is a slow process as group consensus is paramount. We need to reevaluate our perception of time in understanding foreign cultures when business trans-actions are involved.

It is unsafe to assume that nonverbal communication (gestures) used in all innocence in the United States are accepted in the same manner throughout the world. A handshake is a traditional form of greeting in the West. Also, a kiss on the cheek or lips signifies the same thing in many western cultures. However, in China and Japan, public kissing in frown on. Facial expressions vary across cultures--you could get the wrong impression when some Filipinos smile and laugh when underneath they are angry! The "O.K" sign (with thumb and forefinger together) which we think of as "good" is negative in Italy. A thumbs up sign in Greece means "sit on this."

In learning the language of your host country,you should try to obtain copies of documents and types of correspondence you will work with abroad. Foreign language teachers can help in this regard. Learn the form style and basic rudiments of what to expect. Oral and written communication are both important as. communication is culture specific.[17]

While loudness (characteristic of Arab culture) and softness

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[17]Iris I. Varner, "A Comparison of American and French Business Correspondence," THE JOURNAL OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION, Vol. 25, No. 4, Fall, 1988.

(characteristic of Japanese culture) of verbal communication indicate confrontation or timidity to the outsider, such tones are normal and accepted. Although Americans tend to speak in a moderate tone, the situation dictates the level of tone.
The letter has similarities the world over, but short and long reports differ. In Germany, some letters require two signatures while one is sufficient in the United States. In some foreign correspondence, the sense may be correct, but the structure is not. There are differences in British politeness and spelling, the absence of articles, the order of the month, day, and year, punctuation, grammar, tone and style as well as format or organization. German letters tend to be impersonal and stiff; Japanese letters usually open with a reference to the weather and the season. Phrases or cliches unacceptable to Americans are sometimes necessary in Latin American correspondence. The date 3/5/1982 means the third day of May 1982 in German and British English but March 5, 1982 in American English. Germans use a comma for the decimal point and no punctuation to separate thousands; the number 2,416.10 DM is written 2416,10 DM in German.[18]

The successful intercultural business communicator will make a concentrated effort at assimilating into a host country by developing an awareness of the national environmental factors

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[18]Iris V. Varner and Wilma Jean Alexander, "Internationalizing the Basic Business Course," BUSINESS EDUCATION FORUM, Vol. 38, No. 5, February, 1984.

discussed in this paper as well as individual environmental factors.

The factors representing the world's cultures are endless. Yet, to prepare for successful intercultural business communication, you should first accept difference as a challenge, not a deficiency; learn key words for communicating in the host country's language; be aware of specific communication differences in both oral and written format; and finally, do some research on the country. Having done all this, you should have a profitable business or pleasure venture.

The old maxim, When in Rome . . .," takes on increasing significance as American enterprises penetrate and are penetrated by other cultures. Now is the time for all concerned to "Do as the Romans do," start acquiring intercultural business savvy.

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